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ABSTRACT

In 1992, a communications researcher had the opportunity to spend seven months as a visiting professor at the University of Haifa in Israel. From the standpoint of an observer of media coverage, the timing and location of her stay was fortuitous. Israelis were conducting an election off schedule, and at the same time the United States was conducting its primaries. These activities were observed from an apartment on the top of Mt. Carmel, a point from which seven television channels could be picked up: two from Israel, two from Syria, two from Jordan, and one from Lebanon. All of the television organizations were tied into or completely governmentally sponsored. The news, in other words, appeared to be, regardless of language or place of origination, an instrument of propaganda traveling free of border restrictions. Several generalizations can be made about the stations: (1) all countries in the region broadcast some of their entertainment programming in English; (2) all countries broadcast news in their native language and in either Hebrew or Arabic; (3) news programs were set up in a counter programming pattern that allowed native speakers to watch news at a variety of times on different national systems. There was also television news coverage in English, usually via CNN. Descriptions of particular programs in the area brings home the conclusion that the entire area is a bevy of propaganda but that the rich flow of information across borders allows for glimpses of reality. (Contains three references.) (TB)

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Views of News in the Middle East

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Views of News in the Middle East

Introduction: In 1992, I had the opportunity to spend seven months as a Visiting Professor at the University of Haifa in Israel. The timing and the location of my stay turned out to be fortuitous. The timing was excellent because the Israelis called for a new election off schedule and it was done in its entirety, from primaries through the actual campaign to the election, during our stay. This gave me a unique opportunity to view a foreign election and then turn around to watch our primaries from abroad, and then turn around again, and come home for our full blown election. There turned out to be many similarities between the Israeli election results and the American election results: both populations voiced discontent with the status quo and took chances for a change as Rabin became Prime Minister and Clinton became President. And presently, both of their juries are out, or in Las Vegasian terms, they both might be bloodied but are they actually down for the count.

The location turned out to be an international media watchers g-d send. Through sheer luck our apartment was located on the top of Mt. Carmel which is a mountain situated next to the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the valley of the Galilee on the east. Our apartment building faced the Galilee. To my unfolding surprise, every time I played with the television chan-

nel selector, I found myself picking up a new channel from a different country, seven in all: two from Israel, two from Syria, two from Jordan and one from Lebanon. The possibilities to see how they all functioned together was obvious. Thus I started watching all of the channels with rapt attention.

In the interest of academic honesty I must now take a moment and explain my Israeli background. I am Jewish, I speak Hebrew and I have spent, all totaled, about two years in Israel starting twenty years ago when I did Sherut Leumi (National Service) in a town called Yerocham deep in the Negev Desert. This town is so far off the tourist map that I was the only American in the entire place. I consider myself to be a relatively old and knowledgeable Israel hand. There probably is a bias which I work against in my analysis of Middle Eastern society. And thus it is the situation with my views of media and for this discussion of news. And since that is the center of this discussion, let us get to it now.

Structure: All of the television organizations which I was able to view over broadcast were tied into or completely governmentally sponsored. They were all part of a national system. This was particularly evident on Jordanian, Syrian, and Israel Channel 1. It was less so true or the Lebanese CBN sponsored Family Channel originating from Cyprus and on the new, hopefully and eventually self-supporting commercial Israel Channel 2 originating from Beer Sheva.

In a nutshell, the news appeared to be, regardless of language of origination, an instrument of propaganda traveling free of border restrictions. As my time in Israel moved on there was a pattern which developed and rules of order which were followed. These included:

1. All countries broadcast some of their entertainment programming in English
2. Almost all countries broadcast news in their native language and in either Hebrew or Arabic, depending on the country as well
3. News programs were set up in a counter programming pattern which allowed native speakers to watch news at a variety of times on different national systems. In other words, one could bounce from Jordanian News in Hebrew at 8 p.m. to CNN News in English aired from Lebanon at 8:30 p.m. to Hebrew news on Israeli TV at 9 p.m. And at the same time there was Hebrew news on Jordanian television, there was Arabic news on Israeli television.
4. Even though no country in the Middle East has English as its primary language, all systems have news in English.

This fact was fascinating to me. These are countries, not at peace, not rich but whose intense national pride rules their every action. It remains noteworthy that they spend their resources not only on broadcasting news in the opposition camp's language but also in a third, unrelated language as well. The question becomes: To catch whom? And the answer clearly reads that the permeation of English as the neutral language of propa-

ganda, coupled with its abilities to catch both the local educated populace as well as supplying instant soundbites worldwide, makes the expenditures worthwhile.

So where this leaves us is in a place where news hunger prevails alongside of real hunger. There is a feeling of immediacy in the news borne from the microsopic examination of every move and nuance which occurs in the region. Who is talking to whom? Where is it happening? Why? What impact will it have on me? And, at least in Israel, Why wasn't I included?

Analysis of News Programs Broadcast in English: The next part of this discussion is centered upon exactly what television news in English was comprised of vis a vis content and format. To begin this process CNN's role as a worldwide media player must be acknowledged. For the average Israeli, CNN is a household word. During the Persian Gulf War, Israel Television broadcast CNN almost on a 24 hour basis. People were locked in their rooms with their television turned on and CNN holding forth. In an average time, CNN is viewed on the Lebanese channel six days a week for a full half-hour broadcast of the World Report. In addition, bites and packages were regularly picked up by the other various channels, in English, and broadcast or re-broadcast on the National systems which found that particular piece in their national interest.

As you are about to see, the substance and the content of the opening of this CNN report is, in a McLuhanesque way, identical to the content and timbre of those reports which are being shown today.

[Description of Example Shown during Presentation: "CNN World Day"

This show is broadcast daily at 8:30 p.m. local time. The first montage included a picture of Israelis debarking on their way back to the "Peace Talks" in Washington, D.C. After an introduction of the personalities, the first story featured a thre tiered approach to the day's coverage of the Middle East. The opening statement included mention of the resumption of Peace Talks, the U.S. Congress considereing a "massive" loan to Israel, and an incident of terrorism in the Occupied Territories where an Israeli man was shot. There then proceeded to be a story/explanation on each subject including stress being placed the fact that "Israeli military is putting the West Bank under a curfew." There were pictures of Israeli tanks in Lebanon followed by a report of the hope for peace negotiations then taking place in Washington.]

Next we will move to the Israel Broadcast Authority (IBA) and their presentation of English language news. This program is broadcast either six or seven days per week depending upon at what stage of political influence the religious authorities are. It is aired at 5:30 p.m. During the time we were in Israel there was some talk of discontinuing the IBA News in English in favor

of expanding the IBA News in Russian for those immigrants. There was an outcry and the idea was quickly dropped. In these 15 minute segments there is every attempt to be all things to all people in the English speaking world. There is very little depth on anything and the stories generally include only superficial nods to the internal goings-on of the government. Intifada issues are presented but the gist of the program is international in scope and geared at keeping the Anglo community and tourists in touch with the outside world. However, it is obvious to the media observer that there is care taken in choosing stories to be aired in very much the same way that one sees many stories on how awful the weather is in the North while vacationing in South Florida during the winter months. In addition, even place names in weather reports are tools of propaganda: for instance, the Gulf of Eilat on IBA, where on the Jordanian News the exact same area is referred to as the Gulf of Aqaba. For another example, the West Bank, that the IBA weather report calls Judea and Samaria, is called the Western Heights in the Jordanian weather report, even though Jordan has renounced its claims to the region! The format does not allow for extensive packages. In this next example, we will watch the first major story which deals with the Intifada and how Israel stands accused of violations.

[Description of Example Shown in Presentation: "IBA News in English."

This edition of IBA News started with a report on the results of an investigation about brutality by Israeli Police which

led to the collapse/death of a Palestinian man in custody. Then there was an announcement of the formal annexation of Jewish land to Jerusaleum. This was followed by a story concerning the Russian immigrants forming a new political party. The news interviews with the Russians were conducted in English. Then there was International News including coverage of (then) President Bush and a story on Islamic fundamentalists in Algiers. The final segment of the show covered sports and weather.]

Jordan's entry into the fray is represented by the "News at 10." It appeared to reflect King Hussein's extremely sophisticated understanding of the power of the electronic media as a tool of image projection and propaganda. Please understand, that I am in no way casting aspersions, quite to the contrary. King Hussein has been able to control both the content and format of information flow in his very vulnerable position as the chief of that particular troubled country. As you will see in the clip, the anchor for this show is a very attractive, westernized woman. And as you will also see the begining of the show features the King. I will then forward it so that you might see how a CNN package was picked up, due to its story content.

[Description of Example Shown During Presentation: Jordan "News at Ten"

"News at Ten", a daily 15 minute broadcast, always started off with a story and visuals of King Hussein. During this telecast, King Hussein was shown meeting with Jordanian peace negotiators before they left for the next round of talks. All Jorda-

nian news programs always started with a story surrounding the King. Israel was referred to by name unlike in countries such as Syria. There was a story on the reunification of Jerusaleum under Jordanian rule. The next story featured Yassir Arafat. All of the stories were accompanied by actual video and a sound bite. After this was the Jordanian s de to the IBA story the Palestinian who died while being interrogated by Israeli Police. They reported that "It bordred on homicide." There were more stories on fighting between Palestinians and Israelis in Gaza, the PLO and more settlers on the West Bank. There were no stories concerning local Jordanian issues or other international issues. Of particular note was the re-broadcast of a CNN story about Palestinians in East Jerusaleum building additions to their homes without licenses.]

Conclusion: There is much more to the discussion of News in the Middle East especially in regards to language and language differences but time constraints call a halt to the discussion. In conclusion, I would like to state that the entire region is a bevy of propaganda but that the flow of information as the basis of it still allows cross cultural glimpes of reality.

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